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ABSTRACT

Traditional means of education and assessment will cease to exist as distance learning and on-line courses become more available to students. This paper looks at issues of e-content, e-grading, and e-assessment in the world of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL)/English as a Second Language (ESL). The paper further examines the process for designing and implementing on-line Web-based language courses for the Internet. Issues regarding content, design formats, and assessment are discussed, and suggestions are made for understanding how best to implement the theoretical and practical issues facing on-line learners, practitioners, and host institutions brokering or hosting cyber instruction. Current trends in the creation of on-line courses, with a focus on the area of foreign and second language learning, are explored. The paper argues that as educational technology moves closer towards eliminating the practices of traditional classroom teaching, on-line teaching and learning will become a more practical and viable solution to meeting learners' educational needs. (Author/AEF)

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Abstract:

Traditional means of education and assessment will cease to exist, as distance learning and on-line courses become more available to students. This paper will look at issues of e-content, e-grading, and e-assessment in the world of teaching English As A Foreign Language. This paper further examines the process for designing and implementing on-line web based language courses for the Internet. Issues regarding content, design formats and assessment issues will be discussed and suggestions will be made to understand how best to implement the theoretical and practical issues facing on-line learners, practitioners and host institutions brokering or hosting cyber instruction. Current trends in the creation of on-line courses, with a focus in the area of foreign and second language learning will be explored. This paper will argue that as educational technology moves closer and closer towards eliminating the practices of traditional classroom teaching, on-line teaching & learning will become a more practical and viable solution to meet the demand for learners' educational needs.

1.0 Aspects of On-Line Learning:

Soon the on-line language teacher will replace the EFL/ESL classroom teacher. On-line learning is the future of education. Less than a decade ago, graduate programs were teaching modules in programming HyperCard and other languages to ESL/EFL teachers, now entire Master Degrees can be earned in educational technology and on-line education. Those trapped in the world of the chalkboard and textbooks may be left behind as education advances into the 21st century.

It was recently reported that the job of the classroom teacher is expected to be one of the top 5 jobs eliminated by the end of the next century (Time, 2000). Experts predict over the next few decades that over 50% of student populations will be educated using on-line learning and/or technology. It is predicted that the average class size will be 1,000 + students and that these learners will be taught by an expert in his or her field of knowledge (Khaleej Times 2000). On-line education will appeal to the mass public because it will offer courses cheaper and at times convenient to the learner.
The possibility to bring education to the masses will expand, as the population's need for education grows larger. In the past two decades, computers and their software have modernized education with on-line classes; real-time cameras; video conferencing; chat rooms; bulletin boards; smart board technologies; CD Rom software; Internet software;

and interactive tools; bring the learner and the learning process to an even greater understanding and advantage than ever before in the history of education.

It is further assumed that educators, both in the Arabian Gulf and the world wide, will need to be more proficient in educational technology, more aware of the theoretical and practical aspects of foreign and second language teaching, as well as increase recognizing the need to build further awareness of how teaching methodologies, learning strategies, and learning may be altered based on this new medium of on-line education. It is also assumed that educational terminology will change with the rapid growth of on-line courses. For example, it is expected that the classroom practitioner will be known as the e-teacher, the traditional classroom will be referred to as the virtual classroom, traditional learning will be recognized as cyber-learning or e-learning and that electronic testing or e-assessment will replace old fashioned paper and pencil exams.

2.0 Literature Review:

With the rapid expansion of on-line learning and e-courses growing at a phenomenal rate on the World Wide Web (WWW), practitioners and institutions must judge whether or not the quality of their e-course content, e-academic assessment and e-learning process is up to standard. With so many different e-programs being marketed, regulation of e-courses become harder to police.

Regrettably, as qualitative reports grow in the area of on-line learning and e-language learning, the quantitative literature from long-term research still tends to remain scant. Just as guidelines are created for the traditional classroom, so to should there be mandatory regulators assessing and evaluating the cyber-classroom. As Barker (1998) points out with the growth of such on-line programs, institutions need to look at the strain put on these programs/institutions in the areas of support personnel, facilities, production, planning, execution, delivery in comparison to conventional classrooms. Likewise, Calfolla & Knee (1999) warn that the paradigm of limitations to web based distance learning courses have limitations especially with the lack of "interactivity on the Web". They suggest that incorporating programs such as Java/Java Script, Active X/VBScript, Web-based Bulleting Boards and Web-based Chat will improve courses currently on line.

The effectiveness of on-line classroom management, e-learning and e-teaching is determined by a multitude of factors. A recent study by Thompson & Nay (1999) shows that the use of interaction through a simple supplement tool such as a class page, whilst taking an on-line course enhances learner interaction and learner contribution. Ultimately, according to the researchers would lead to more successful learning results. Another qualitative study by Hindes (1999) observed Librarians who were enrolled in an on-line course. The study shows that web-based instruction provides a more positive learning environment for students. On-line participants found that web-based instruction allows the sharing of ideas with a broader prospect of people using World Wide Web Courses (WebCT). Furthermore, it was proven to aid them in the use of more statistical processes of gaining information quicker through electronic media and offered even further support services through bulletin

boards and electronic chat with colleagues enrolled in the course in comparison to those learners enrolled in a traditional classroom.

Another solution to further improve on-line learning suggested by Winfield, Mealy & Scheibel (1998) proposes capitalization of the vast amount of multimedia available in today's learning environments, especially those medias found on the World Wide Web (WWW) because the sites can accommodate so many different learning styles. Swigger (et al 1999) state that in order to provide teachers and students with electronic learning environments that support mentoring and collaboration through electronic means the development of software must support the "same time/ different place educational collaborative activities over the Internet".

Once the fundamental principles and challenges of an on-line program have been addressed by the practitioner and institution, it is then time to considered the e-course itself. According to Hsu (et al 1999) there are ten basic considerations for the design of a virtual classroom. Their research states that programs need to first assess the needs of the learners/ institution and to consider the necessary conditions needed to satisfy them. Secondly, they suggest that institutions/practitioners estimate the development cost, effort and implications of the virtual classroom. Thirdly, they believe it is essential that institutions/practitioners take the necessary time needed to plan the virtual classroom.

It is further recommended that careful consideration be given when designing the virtual classroom. Next, they emphasize the importance of the materials being prepared and the contents being distributed amongst the learners. The course, instructor and learner must make sure that there are enough ways to enable clear lines of communication. The researchers recommend course content must be implemented in a manner, which is pedagogically and theoretically sound. The researchers state that it is essential that one looks carefully at the online assessment methods for evaluation. It is equally important that the course implement class management procedures, which are fair and equal to all learners enrolled in the course. Once this is completed, the researchers suggest that practitioners/institutions then set up the system. This means that the practitioner needs to maintain and update the virtual classroom.

Once the foundations of the e-program and on-line course are established, it is then necessary to develop the course's academic content and standards of quality. Sabine & Gilley (1999) argue the following phases of course development are important when designing work for a proper program. First the concept of planning a course is necessary to understand and identify key considerations for designing and making decisions, which directly affect the course content. They hypothesize that the design of the course and the organizational concepts associated with basic competencies required of the learner through the inception of core concepts and tasks in the virtual classroom must relate to the units of study, the learning resources, simulations, production labs and assessment tools used to measure and evaluate the learner. This is because Sabine & Gilley believe that once these components are in place, that production and simulation are essential aspects to help develop a successful program. The end result suggests that a trial run of the course be piloted, followed by an evaluation and reflection period. These periods should be implemented before the practitioner/institution begin a full-scale run of the e-course with on-line learners.

Once an e-course is engaged, Winfield, Mealy and Scheibel (1998) suggest increasing learner motivation and perception. The practitioner must build up the learner's confidence using the technology. The e-teacher should build his or her personality into the course. Moreover, the e-teacher should provide a clear content to real situations using cases studies and simulation before building on the personal and professional experiences of the learners. They believe that relating materials and content can later help build student teams, who learn through a collaborative process in order for the virtual teacher to get accurate results from the application of the course design and assessment results of the courses educational effectiveness with learners.

3.0 E-Course Evaluation

Every educator has experience what it is like to be a student in a poorly constructed or taught course at least once in their lifetime. We swore as teachers never ever to repeat the behavior of "that practitioner" or to offer materials to students like the ones we were given. However, everyday somewhere in the world, a student suffers at the hands of a bad teacher or a bad course. Offering honest evaluation, constructive feedback and listening to observers & participants are essential when evaluating any course, but especially an on-line course.

When evaluating an e-course on the Internet it is important to look at how the language course is being taught. The professional appearance of the course may appear to have face validity, but lack content validity or academic substance.

Where does one begin to evaluate an on-line course? As the old saying goes: "at the beginning!" Start with the simplest aspect, the course layout. How are the academic content, visuals, assessments, projects and activities laid out for the learner? Moreover, the evaluator must also examine the organization of the units or modules of the course. For example: How long is the course? How is the content presented to the learner? How does the e-course sequence itself with the different learning blocks of material? Is the material relevant and adaptable to the level of the learner? It is at this stage, that the assessor must then look at how the language lessons are presented to the potential learner. Questions such as "Is there a theoretical ordering to the components?" "Is it academically and/or pedagogically sound as an e-course for language learning?" "Does it focus on one skill or is it an integrated course?" and "Is the language used in authentic and meaningful contexts?" More importantly, does the course offer the students further practice beyond the lesson? Are the language lessons communicative, relevant and offer the learner a variety of activity types?

As you serve as an evaluator assessing a course, it is important to look at the balance of skills in each e-lesson, the e-course and the e-program. For example, if a learner is listening to an on-line text and is asked to choose from a series of written multiple-choice answers, perhaps skill contamination in reading did not assess the learner's listening comprehension accurately. Perhaps, inappropriate content, which goes against the learner's beliefs, was incorporated in the materials, which as research as shown can affect the listening comprehension score of the student. For example, imagine a devout Muslim student listening to a talk by an atheist during the Holy month of Ramadan. Not only would the student be outraged because of the lack of cultural and

religious insensitivity, he/she might stop the course immediately loosing out on his/her chance for education because of an instructor's poor judgment. Coupled with the fact that e-courses are more global than traditional classes, cultural suitability is very important. Materials should be interesting and offer content relevant to all participants. Sometimes in the EFL/ESL world, teachers take it upon themselves to make it a soapbox for pushing their beliefs and their culture experiences upon other people who may not share the same ideologies, but must go along with practitioner out of fear of not passing the class. This type of behavior must be avoided at all costs in an e-course.

E-course content should be professional, neutral and communicative as to involve all learners from around the world who may or may not be enrolled. Furthermore materials should be recycling structures and revisiting forms/functions as well as lexis during the course. Because more e-courses don't use a teacher's book or student workbook, it is important that students can download materials for practice either from the course site or from other WWW Internet sites. On-line courses should be selective in their supplemental site choices. The e-practitioner should ask: Are the materials used by the on-line course authentic? Does the instructor use natural language to help the learner master the language being taught? A theoretical base must be implemented to make the course pedagogically sound.

Once the syllabi and curriculum is agreed upon, new issues involving testing and measurement arise. For example, how will students be assessed or demonstrate their progress whilst taking the on-line course? Will your institution fall into the trap that the testing program controls the teaching program, or will it take the more logical approach and let the teaching program overshadow the testing program? Will your institution allow alternative assessments to be factored into the evaluation process? If examinations are used, who will determine the validity and reliability of the on-line tests? Will the on-line test offer feedback to the program? More importantly, does the test reflect what the students are learning and experiencing in the on-line course? In other words, will the on-line testing program follow the cornerstones of good testing practice? These issues must be clearly ironed out before a course goes on-line to the public and more importantly to ensure quality language learning for the student.

Other serious considerations must also be discussed amongst practitioners and their institutions before hosting an on-line academic course. For example, once a test is on-line, what issues will be involved in test security? Just recently, a friend took an on-line course for her own personal enrichment. Because the student was more computer savvy than the on-line teacher, she was able to re-take the test and submit my results after printing it off first and looking up the answers. Immediately in the conversation, it became very aware that traditional tests could be lifted or re-taken from on-line courses without the teacher being alerted. Therefore, as practitioners, we must ask ourselves: will the results of the course work be a true reflection of the capabilities of the on-line student? Again in a different conversation other people have reported having had help from outside parties, for on-line projects due. It is almost impossible for on-line courses to police the honesty of the student taking the course, yet many people receive on-line degrees, which are equivalent to on-site degrees. Unlike the traditional classroom, where the teacher can monitor that the student completes the work himself/herself, the on-line classroom does not offer the same luxuries. Therefore, when designing the course, the on-line teacher must program extra safeguards into the materials and tests to prevent this

from happening. Otherwise, the credibility of on-line courses, degrees and certifications will suffer considerably.

Although these criteria serve as basic guidelines for evaluators to objectively and subjectively rate on-line language courses offered to learners around the world as well as help those starting to design their own language based on-line courses, it is not limited to specific points of reference. Each on-line course is different and each on-line evaluator should treat each course as such.

4.0 E-Course Design

Nothing is worse than entering the class of the Nutty Professor. I once worked with a teacher who forgot everything and lost papers daily. His middle name was disorganization. Sometimes we joked he had two speeds slow and reverse because beyond being late because he forgot where he was supposed to be, he could never get his act together or stay on one train of thought for more than 10 minutes at a time. He could not design a course or run a program despite being a very intelligent individual. He thought you could "wing it" and "jump around" with materials. He never saw the need for consistency or the need for building lessons upon lessons. Often his students were behind in the curriculum and were as lost as he was on a daily basis. The lesson to be learned is: When designing an e-course, one cannot be disorganized!

It is important that the modules created sequence each other in a logical order that is pedagogically sound. It is even better if the materials can be piloted before being distributed for mass consumption on an on-line course. On that same note, if a practitioner or institution is creating an on-line course serious thought and consideration must be given to the e-discourse and the e-syllabus being taught to learners around the globe. Whether or not form, function and meaning can be taught better to language learners electronically as opposed to the traditional classroom, can be debated. It depends primarily on the program, the teacher, the quality and standards of the course offered and the technology being used. The most important things that have to be determined by the on-line instructor are: What are you teaching? And why are you teaching it?

Before setting forth to design an e-course, one must consider the key concepts of writing curriculum, materials and their need to be adapted for the on-line learner. More importantly, the on-line instructor and teacher must make sure they have the technical support and technical requirements necessary to host an on-line course for language learners. Other issues, which must be considered, involve logistics such as: Will the whole course be loaded on the WWW at once or will lessons & assignments go out weekly in modules? As part of classroom management, on-line teachers should also think about the physical set up of the e-classroom for learning and the emotional set-up of the e-classroom to support learners who may or may not have difficulty with the lack of physical contact with other students enrolled in the course. Lastly, in planning any course design the on-line instructor and the institution should agree upon the long and short-term goals of the e-classroom. It is important to note that in a traditional classroom, it is easier to negotiate what is learned with the language student. On-line courses often because of course size and technical aspects do not have the same flexibility.

Once the basics of the on-line course are settled, it is then that the e-teacher must decide if the course will take the approach of task-based learning or will it lean more towards self-directed learning. On the same course of action, the on-line instructor must also consider how they will foster integrated activities in content and skill areas with his/her students. Likewise, the e-teacher will need to decided whether or not collaborative activities will be incorporated into the course because as an e-facilitator on the course, the instructor should help prepare and choose materials; help aid the student better his/her language skills; coach the learner to go beyond the on-line classroom with his or her language skills; monitor the language learning, course, and learners; and follow-up on assessments, questions or concerns raised by students.

When designing e-courses issues such as who is in the student population of the e-community and in the e-target language groups must be considered before writing, designing or implementing the on-line English class. For example, how will the practitioner teach concepts in on-line language classrooms as opposed to traditional classrooms? Will the teacher be teaching the class in real time or will it be a less interactive self-paced course? Once this is determined, it is then that the teacher must begin designing the e-curriculum, whilst taking into consideration many different factors including issues such as the motivation of the learners, cultural backgrounds, language backgrounds and the different methodologies, which can and can't be used electronically.

For example, what if your course were to incorporate an on-line listening component? Would all of your students have the technology to receive or send sound bites? What type of listening exercises would you choose? If you were teaching a conversational listening class on-line, how would you express pauses, negotiations, repetitions, clarifications, turn-taking to students? If you choose to teach an academic listening class on-line what type of lecture formats and note-taking exercises would you encourage students to undertake? How would you teach the receptive skill through selective listening techniques such as trying to hear and comprehend redundancies? Is it assumed that students will go into product listening instead of going through process listening? Will the student just turn to automatic pilot and rely on subconscious listening? As the course instructor, how would you incorporate micro and macro listening skills? Issues such as these for just one on-line course section would need to be clearly considered before implementing the module to the public, if the practitioner and institution wanted to maintain a quality course and program.

5.0 Conclusion

As an on-line course designer, one must consider e-course objectives, the e-content, the e-policies and e-procedures, the e-evaluation of the course & instructor, the e-office hours and of course how to deal with e-problems, which will arise during the on-line course. Beyond the basics listed above the on-line teacher when designing a course must also consider how he/she will deal with the emotional, psychological, and learning style of the perspective on-line student. As an on-line course designer, other factors such as the cyber learners' linguistic knowledge, motivational barriers, language systems, e-course expectations, affective factors, language learning anxiety and his/her schema or background knowledge about topics taught or available in the on-line course must again be examined or discussed before a solid course can materialize.

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